

Prologue

1853 Brighton, England

It was a warm spring day as four children played tag in the English garden of the Viscount Rolantry's country estate. Two of them looked identical with their black curly hair, deep violet eyes, and pale white skin, except one was a boy and one was a girl. The third child was a fair-haired boy with remarkable brown eyes and slender build. The fourth boy, with black hair and matching dark eyes, was not from England but was visiting while his French father conducted business.

"I caught you, Mags," the dark-haired boy, Randall, yelled at his twin sister, using the nickname he had given her.

Sulking, the petite Margaret complained, "Randall, you promised you would try to catch Henry first."

Margaret tried to pull free from her "captor" but was unable to break loose and screamed, "Help me, help me," knowing that one of the other boys would come to her rescue. For even at that age of eight, men fell at Margaret's feet.

"I demand you release the lady at once," yelled the French boy, Pierre.

"I will save you, my love," the fair-haired Henry cried out as he rushed up and stood between the twins, wooden sword in hand. "On guard, you scallywag. Unhand the princess at once," Henry taunted.

"You cannot have her. She is mine forever," returned Randall, as he pulled his own wooden sword free from his waistband and swung it at the other boy.

For several moments, the three boys play-fought around Margaret with their wooden swords until Henry grabbed Margaret's arm with his free hand and said, "You are wrong. She will be mine! I am going to marry her one day."

Everyone froze for a moment as all the boys, with the exception of her brother, were smitten with Margaret, but none of them ever discussed it.

The twins looked at each other with wide eyes, and then laughingly, they said in unison, “Ewww!”

Both nodded, not needing to talk of their plan, then bolted in opposite directions.

Heartbroken, Henry hung his head and walked over to the tree nearby. He leaned against it in discouragement.

Margaret turned to see if any of the boys were chasing her and realized Henry was upset. She went to stand next to him and gently put her hand on his arm, asking, “What is wrong, Henry? We were just playing.”

He looked up to meet her eyes and said with sadness, “You are never going to love me like I love you, are you, Margaret?”

“Do not be silly, Henry. You will always be my best friend.”

He looked at Margaret and knew that would never be enough.

Chapter 1

1861 Brighton, England

Lady Margaret Wellesley, daughter of the Earl of Renwick, sucked in her breath anxiously. What was she thinking? She would never be able to measure up to the kind of wife Henry expected. And well, she knew it. It was part of the reason that Margaret had never let herself truly get close to him. She kept hidden so many parts of herself because she was afraid to really let him know her. Deep down, she worried she would disappoint him if he saw her imperfections.

She arched an eyebrow as she looked at herself critically in the mirror. She tucked and pulled at the folds of her ivory, satin gown to make sure every detail was in place. Her dress had a corseted waist with a full, bell-shaped skirt that tiered down in cascading layers. The corset was accented with tiny rows of shimmering pearls that crisscrossed and complemented her petite frame. The gown was beautiful and she had waited for weeks for it to finally be finished. She had been promised that her dress would be the most spectacular and stunning one at her ball. Coupled with her contrasting raven locks that were accented with strands of pearls woven through and a matching set that lay around her neck and on her ears, she was pleased with her ensemble.

Margaret made her way from her dressing chamber towards the ballroom. She descended the grand staircase, pausing at the middle flat and resting her gloved hands on the banister. This was her big moment. Tonight, she would finally be presented to society.

Alfred, the family butler, came from around the corner and announced, “Presenting Lady Margaret, the daughter of the Earl of Renwick.”

All the eyes of the assembled guests fastened on the freshly blossoming sixteen-year-old girl. Everyone in the English nobility, or “the ton” as they were more commonly referred to, had heard the rumors of Lady Margaret’s alluring beauty.

From the moment her name and description circulated amongst them, the eligible noblemen had started to seek out her father to try to pursue her. She had inherited her late mother’s aristocratic face and delicate bone structure and her father’s Irish white skin and dark violet eyes.

Margaret smiled with graceful ease as she overtly scanned the room for Henry.

“He is not here yet.”

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. Whose voice was that? She had never heard it before. It was deep and resonating.

Slowly, she turned to her left and looked up. Her eyes met the most piercing set of blue eyes she had ever seen. After a second’s pause, she took in the rest of the man who matched the voice.

He was... beautiful. There was no other way to describe the stranger standing before her. He had curly brown hair that enhanced the blueness of his eyes. His face and body were flawless, built perfectly and gleamed golden like ripe olives. And he was so tall; he towered over her.

Dashing in his formal attire, Margaret stared at the striking stranger, wondering who was he. She had never seen him before, and she knew everyone who socialized in her circle.

“To whom are you referring, my lord?” she asked with pretend naiveté.

“Why, to your betrothed, certainly... or have you forgotten him already? Not that I mind, considering that it puts *my* task much more in the realm of attainability.”

She liked this stranger and his easy banter. Deciding to shuck her coyness and participate in his game, she replied with purposeful playfulness, “I have not forgotten because I have not the intent or a good enough reason to do so.”

“That is because you have not met me until now. I am going to change everything.”

Margaret was rather astonished by the stranger’s blatant statement but did not want him to realize it. She opted to counter in an effortless tone, “Why, sir, you presume I plan to get to know you.”

He smiled with a hint of slight cockiness and held out his arm to her. “It seems that you are without escort this eve. Let me be of assistance. I would be honored if you would allow me to accompany you to dinner.”

Laughing with gaiety, she put her hand in the crook of his arm and said, “Thank you, good sir, I would be—”

But she was broken off midsentence by a voice from behind that she recognized all too well. “*That* will not be necessary. I have arrived, and I will be escorting Lady Margaret.”

She stiffened automatically out of reflex, not liking Henry finding her here like this. It could appear improper, and in their circle of acquaintances, appearances meant everything.

Turning around expeditiously, she put on her most endearing smile. “Good evening, my lord.

I am glad that you have arrived.”

“Yes, by all means, the lady was waiting for you *so anxiously* upon these stairs,” the gentleman stated with a hint of sarcasm.

Henry stepped forward and gently but firmly took Margaret’s hand, putting it on his own arm. Margaret looked up at her betrothed and saw the man she had known since she was a little girl. He was tall and of a slender build but had an elegant grace that surrounded him. He had straight blond hair that was slicked back tonight for the ball, matched with strong brown eyes and a warm smile. Most women would consider him to be very appealing, and some had even said so when they thought Margaret was not listening.

The two men stood toe-to-toe in their regal dress suits, and moments ticked by as Henry stared at the man across from him. Finally, Henry stated coldly, “Lady Margaret, may I introduce to you the Duke of Witherton.”

Without realizing it, she took in a deep breath and held it tightly. She had heard about the duke. His name was Richard Charles Townsend III, Duke of Witherton, and he and Henry were bitter enemies stemming from their time in the military. Richard was older by a few years and had a greater title, and by all rights assumed he deserved to be commissioned first, but Henry received the position and rank that Richard had sought. Henry and the duke ended up in one fight after another until finally they decided to end what little contact they had altogether.

What was he doing here? She had to know. Of course, her father had invited him. The entire ton had been invited. But the duke never went anywhere, least of all to parties of those whose titles were of a lesser nature.

“Your Grace, you do us a great honor by being here. Although, I must say, I am surprised to find you here considering that you have never attended one of *our* gatherings before,” she said pointedly.

“My lady, you are correct, and it has been to my disadvantage, so it seems,” he said while looking at her meaningfully. She blushed, receiving his message all too clear.

Trying to sound convincing but failing, Margaret replied, “You exaggerate, sir. We have nothing in the country worthy of your time.”

Margaret leaned into Henry’s support and kept her eyes averted, trying to hide the fact that she was blushing.

“On the contrary, I had been told that there was something here that would fit my, shall we

say, tastes. And I see that I was well informed. I see something that I fancy and is *quite* worth my time.”

And with that, before either Margaret or Henry could react, Richard took Margaret’s free hand gently and bent over to kiss the top of it.

Then the most unexpected thing happened: Margaret felt this fluttering feeling in her stomach, almost like... No, she was imagining it because she had worked herself up so much for tonight. She could not have felt butterflies! It was impossible, and especially not by a kiss from this man she was supposed to hate!

Quickly, she pulled her hand away while giving him a disdainful look, and he slowly straightened. The duke slightly raised his eyebrows and smiled in part amusement and part understanding that he made her feel something she did not expect.

“I hope to enjoy the rest of the evening, and I am sure I will, since you will be in attendance. I look forward to speaking with you again at a future time, my lady.”

Then, almost as an afterthought, he turned to Henry and stated with a slight decline of his head, “Rolantry.”

With that, the duke turned and slowly strolled down the stairs and into the dining hall, leaving them quite alone.

The discomfort was substantial between Margaret and Henry. She did not know what to say or how to break the silence. Instead, she opted for the easiest way out and stood quietly.

“It is not like you to be so silent, *my sweet*. What is on your pretty little mind?”

Oh no. She could hear it in his tone and affectionate address that he was indeed angry. He was clipping his words, and he never used terms of endearment in public because he knew it embarrassed her. It was a sure sign that fury seethed underneath his cool exterior.

He waited a few moments and asked again, “*My love*, whatever are you thinking about?”

“I was just thinking that if we do not hurry, we will be late to dine.”

“That can wait. This, on the other hand, needs to be handled straightaway.”

It seemed there was no way around it. She was going to have to deal with what had just happened. He was not going to let it pass without comment.

“The duke approached me. I was standing here searching for you when he startled me from behind.”

“Yes, that may be what you want me to believe, but you did not seem startled when I came

upon the two of you together.”

That did it; she was tired of his endless jealousy. He was always overreacting anytime any man outside her family paid any attention to her. She was going to put a stop to it once and for all. “My lord, please stop being so overprotective and possessive. The duke was only being courteous and giving his greetings to his hostess. I did not, nor did anyone else, read anything more into it, *except you!*”

“Is that so? Why, I was certain that the fact that we are betrothed gives me some right to care about who you are with and what you are doing!”

Oh, how it infuriated her that he thought he could control her. Margaret knew how marriages worked in their society, but she hated the fact that she would be entering into a marriage that made her little more than a possession. “You do not own me, my lord, at least not yet.”

A look of deep hurt crossed Henry’s face as he retorted, “My intent was never to own you, only to love and protect you. Is that so wrong?”

Margaret regretted what she said as soon as he explained his actions. She felt like such an insensitive and mean-spirited person. Henry was her oldest friend and she cared deeply for him. She did not want to hurt him.

Chagrined over her behavior, Margaret said, “No, that is not wrong if that was all you intended.”

“The truth of the matter is that the duke has no scruples and even less morals and would stop at nothing to get at me, including using you.”

“I hardly think that I could be a valuable pawn in any scheme directed at you. You have always been self-sufficient, and I, in all reality, am of little consequence.”

He turned to face her and looked deeply into her eyes. It was all she could do to not turn away from his searching gaze. “You must have no idea how important you truly are to me.”

She allowed his confession to sink in momentarily, but just as quickly pushed it away as if he never said it.

Margaret knew that she was trapped in her betrothal to Henry due to a couple of key reasons. First and foremost was his dead father’s influence over her father. They had been the closest of friends from childhood and raised their families together, agreeing to marry their children to each other. All Henry had to do was mention his father’s name and the earl got teary-eyed. Secondly, her father was a man of his word and he had given it to Henry. It did not matter how many suitors

pursued her; nothing would change her father's mind on the subject.

Really, her father should have found someone with a greater title for her once he inherited his earldom, but he chose to stay true to his promise instead. It also helped that no one could match Henry's wealth. His family had the gift of knowing a good investment when it came along, and Henry had banked on it more than once. He was considered one of the better catches in their social circle because his wealth made up for what he lacked in title.

Henry broke the uncomfortable silence. "You are right about supper. We are on the verge of being late. We should make our way to the dining hall," he said as he guided her forward with steely resolve.